Privatisation of Italian Cultural Heritage

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Italy is home to much of the European cultural heritage, including artistic, archaeological, architectural and environmental heritage. Articles 7 and 22 (now 33), introduced in the Financial Act 2002 (now Law 112/2002) by the current Italian government, are privatising part of it. Already, objects from the mediaeval period to the 20th century have been sold to international investment firms and private investors for amounts that many Italian experts consider well below the median market price. Hundreds of other objects, among them temples, old cities, medieval palazzos, archaeological sites, museums, beaches and islands, are waiting to be sold. Currently, this case is not only a source of division in Italian politics but is also the subject of heated public debate. It highlights crucial social and cultural problems relating to global privatisation that the world community will have to face in the coming years.

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According to UNESCO estimates, Italy is home to much of the European cultural heritage, including artistic, archaeological, architectural and environmental heritage. Articles 7 and 22 (now 33), introduced in the Financial Act 2002 (now Law 112/2002) by the current Italian government, are privatising part of it. Already, 36 objects from the mediaeval period to the 20th century have been sold to international investment firms and private investors for amounts that many Italian experts consider well below the median market price. Hundreds of other objects, among them temples, old cities, medieval palazzos, archaeological sites, museums, beaches and islands, are waiting to be sold.
Currently, this case is not only a source of division in Italian politics but is also the subject of heated public debate. It concerns the limits of privatisation, and could lead to a broad new anti-capitalism movement. Even if it is considered as a problem relating only to Continental Europe, which would not be felt the same way in the Anglo-American world, it highlights crucial social and cultural problems relating to global privatisation that the world community will have to face in the coming years. The current privatisation of Italy’s cultural heritage is sufficiently complex to consider it, under certain circumstances, as a model for other parts of the world.

History, Ideological Influences and Juridical Basis

Italy’s situation was well described in two sentences by the current Minister of Cultural Goods, Giuliano Urbani: ‘Italy is like a person with many houses, but also with many debts. So we have to look at which houses are dispensable.’ From the mid-1980s onwards, the growing influence of Thatcherism and neo-liberalism, combined with Italy’s inefficient and bureaucratic preservation of monuments, a chronic shortage of money in this field, the high maintenance costs of state-owned property and Italy’s budget deficit, have led to animated discussions about the privatisation of world-famous Italian museums. Owing to a lack of strategic and financial autonomy, a slow decline towards a form of superficial privatisation started in the first half of the 1990s, effected by different governments of all political persuasions: left, right and moderate. However, the rapid succession of governments in Italy allowed only small steps to be taken in this direction; in 1990 museum services were partly privatised through temporary licences; didactic services and the organisation of exhibitions followed at a later date. Thereafter, in the 1990s, came various laws that aimed at privatising state-owned property in general, but which had little effect. However, in 2002 Silvio Berlusconi’s second neo-liberal and mid-rightist government, building on laws passed by former mid-leftist governments, introduced two important passages into the Financial Act that later became Law 112/2002, which has often been referred to as the ‘deficit-saver law’ owing to its drastic economising measures.

First, ‘State Patrimony plc’ was founded, which is completely state owned. All estates belonging to the state were included, including all monuments, museums and cultural objects. The company is administered by the Ministry of Economic Affairs, and a professional financial manager is the chief executive. This de facto assigning of all cultural heritage to the Ministry of Economic Affairs was a measure taken in order to improve the general management of state property and to allow the use of the infrastructural budget for the purposes of preservation.

Second, the possibility was accepted of selling objects belonging to ‘State Patrimony plc’ through ‘Infrastructures plc’—another state-owned company. For this purpose, objects that could be privatised were listed. Privatisation should lighten the load of the public budget, relieving it of maintenance and restoration costs. The conditions to be met are comparatively light; if the objects are under a preservation order, the Ministry of the Economy as well as the Ministry for the Protection of Historical Monuments must agree. For the remainder the law has often been criticised for being ‘flexible’,
lacking clear statements about which objects may and may not be privatised. There seem to be no additional criteria except the one requiring the sale of groups of objects and not of individual objects so as not to leave single objects of minor interest behind. The current situation could be summarised as follows:

Because of Italy’s oppressive public debt, which stood at just over Euro 1.34 trillion at the end of 2002, a financial act passed by the Italian Parliament in June 2002 clears the way for the Economy Minister to authorize the liquidation of some of Italy’s cultural patrimony. Two companies—Patrimonio SpA and Infrastrutture SpA—can sell or lease historical monuments, art treasures or natural resources such as islands, beaches and forests belonging to the state. When the property is of particular cultural interest, the Economy Minister needs an okay from the Culture Minister to sell. Some of these assets will be sold to reduce Italy’s ballooning deficit while others can be used as financial guarantees for large public works.³

Current State of Sales

Following the release of Law 112/2002, single listings with alienable assets have been compiled by the Economy Ministry. Italian experts estimate that there are at least 300 objects of cultural and historical value among them.⁴ In sales from February and April 2003, at least 36 have already been sold to private investors, among them corporate groups and tobacco firms. So far, none of the purchasers have included cultural institutions, and instead have been international real estate and economic investors, who operate at a profit. Among the assets sold so far are the following monuments:

- Villa Manzoni, Rome (19th century);
- Manifattura Tabacchi, Florence (20th century);
- Archivio di Stato di Bari (19th century);
- Palazzo Correr, Venice (16th century);
- Palazzo Via dei Cambiatori, Reggio Emilia (1901);
- Palazzo Piazza del Monte, Reggio Emilia (1671);
- Palazzo Via Balbi, Genoa (1677).

Most of these objects were sold to the American Carlyle Group, while the large-scale Manifattura Tabacchi, which ‘has the dimensions of a small town’,⁵ went to an international corporate group, and when divided up will probably be resold at a profit to international cigarette firms and other investors in due course.

Problems

Previous listings and sales have highlighted several problems. There is no complete list, as yet, containing all state-owned objects (estimated to number 400,000), which would allow a well-planned, long-term overall sale policy. Currently, there is also no comprehensive inventory of all artistic historic monuments. Listings of public property for sale are, therefore, being compiled and supplemented on the basis of suggestions made by the Ministry of the Economy, the regions and local authorities. New assets that can

Figure 2 Palazzo Via dei Cambiatori, Reggio Emilia (1901). © Associazione Limen—Beni culturali, Firenze–Roma, http://www.limen.org

Figure 3 Palazzo Piazza del Monte, Reggio Emilia (17th Century). © Associazione Limen—Beni culturali, Firenze–Roma, http://www.limen.org

Figure 4 Palazzo Via Balbi, Genoa (17th Century). © Associazione Limen—Beni culturali, Firenze–Roma, http://www.limen.org
potentially be sold continue to appear on various lists. This method does not allow for a comprehensive policy of sales based on a clear and systematic concept. Assets seem to be sold due to urgency or because they are not in use.

Suggestions put forward by local authorities on how to use the objects other than selling them seem to have been ignored in many cases. For instance, the relevant municipality for Massa d’Albe is opposed to the famous archaeological site of Alba Fucens being put up for sale (see Case Study 3 below). Similarly, other municipalities have been ignored, such as parts of the municipality of Padova in the Castello dei Carraresi case (see below). On the other hand, there has been insufficient financial support for cultural heritage from municipalities, provinces and regions over a considerable period of time, so many of the objects are decaying. In previous lengthy and tedious negotiations between state, regional and local authorities, in many cases no solutions have been found to finance the preservation of monuments, which also reflects the large number of historic monuments in Italy. However, in some cases, proposals for local public funding and use, instead of sale, have been made by various citizens’ groups.

Lists published so far have often seemed to be rather opaque in that they usually catalogue only those objects to be auctioned, without stating explicitly whether they are subject to preservation requirements. Thus, members of the public can remain ignorant about these requirements, unless they investigate each case themselves. For example, the renowned Italian cultural heritage expert Lorenzo Pagnini writes:

The first privatisation tranche of state-owned real estate, which is part of the property available for sale at relative cadastral prices in euros, was published on the 800 pages of the ordinary supplement No. 163 to the Gazzetta Ufficiale No. 183 of August 6th 2002. The problem is that the ‘for sale’ lists do not mark the buildings of cultural value with preservation requirements. They give simple cadastral information—province, municipality, address, cadastral value, parcel. The prospective buyers have to find out by themselves which of the properties are buildings subject to preservation requirements and which hold historic value.6

This lack of clarity seems to make the procedure opaque for both citizens’ groups and parliament, as shown, for example, by the parliamentary interrogation of a leftist senator from the sale of the first 36 objects on 3 March 2003:

Regarding the news item related to the transfer of 36 assets, property of the Economy Ministry, the government should provide major explanations. What kind of assets are they? On what conditions were they transferred and at what value? Are there, among them, any objects of historic artistic value? It is desirable and urgent that the state discloses the details of this operation. Otherwise the doubts which have been raised about the privatisations … and about the Patrimonio SpA [State Patrimony plc] will reinforce.7

The sales procedure leads to prices below real market value. Because they have to be group sales, which require larger investments, large international investors seem to be favoured. For instance, in the case of the sale portfolio consisting of 36 properties ‘little more than €230,000,000 were paid, an amount that coincides almost to the cent with the asking price, which was €230,033,799. These are data which have been confirmed
by the Economy Ministry. This method of selling at the lowest value has led to speculations about private interests in the background.

The Economy Ministry and its holding companies ‘Patrimonio dello stato SpA’ and ‘Infrastrutture SpA’ have formed some additional sub-companies for each individual portfolio sale. Their task is to carry out an auction and to attract international bids. These companies seem to be linked to associations of international real estate agents.

The poorly regulated cooperation between the Ministries of Economy and Culture seems to cause friction and may encourage unwanted sale on the basis of competing interests.

To accelerate the disposals and make sales more efficient, Law 112/2002 states that:

- the Council of State cannot express its opinion or add obligations;
- the obligations to preserve a monument or building—if there are any—have no effect whatsoever on its sale;
- historic artistic assets, once sold to a private individual, can be resold to whomever and whenever desired.

Case Study 1: Villa Manzoni near Rome

Villa Manzoni near Rome was built in 1928 by architect Armando Brasini on behalf of the Conti Manzoni family. Built on the ruins of an ancient Roman villa near the

Figure 5 Villa Manzoni, Rome (20th Century). © Associazione Limen—Beni culturali, Firenze–Roma, http://www.limen.org
The tomb of Nerone, Villa Manzoni was restructured in 1960. The whole area alongside Via Cassia is an archaeological site of architectural, historic, cultural and environmental value.

The building of 3,000 square metres surrounded by a 90,000 square metre park is located at number 471, on via Cassia, at the height of the Nerone tomb, which the various mayors of Rome and Culture Ministers repeatedly declared the intention to buy and transform into a public garden. Situated almost at the centre of the city, its location is highly esteemed featuring mainly residential buildings. The real-estate complex consists of three different buildings: the villa principale [main villa], the ex-villino [at the time a small villa for the gardener] and the ex stalle [at the time the stables]. The area is used above all for residential, recreational and private purposes.  

The whole building complex was sold in February 2003 for €230,033 to the American Carlyle Investment Group (as part of a portfolio of 36 buildings for a total of €230 million). The Carlyle Group itself communicated:

Mipim, Cannes—The Carlyle Group, a global private equity firm, has acquired a portfolio of 36 properties in Italy from the country’s Ministero dell’Economia e delle Finanze for €230 million. The transaction is likely to be one of the most significant sales to take place in the European real estate market in 2003 and quadruples the number of properties held by Carlyle in Europe. This is Carlyle’s largest single real estate investment to date, globally. The portfolio was put up for auction on January 22nd 2003 in a single lot, giving potential bidders until February 24th to respond. … ‘I am delighted that we completed this significant transaction in such a short space of time’, said Guido Audagna, a Milan-based director of The Carlyle Group, who led the transaction. ‘We were able to couple local knowledge with global resources to complete extensive due diligence as well as put in place financing on a significant scale within one month.’ ‘This portfolio fits perfectly within our investment strategy to acquire commercial buildings in off-prime business districts across France, Italy and Germany. By directing active asset-management programmes from within our own team we are able to take swift action to improve the properties we acquire, offering very attractive commercial space to tenants operating in a highly cost conscious environment’, said Eric Sasson, a managing director of The Carlyle Group, who heads up the firm’s European real estate team. … The portfolio includes 36 buildings with a total of 290,000 square metres. The buildings are located on the outskirts of Milan and Rome as well as in the centre of Bari, Genoa, Naples and Reggio Emilia. Due to the fact that new leases could not be signed during the auction process the properties have a 40% vacancy rate upon acquisition, providing Carlyle with an outstanding opportunity to increase yields swiftly and increase the value of the portfolio. ‘In Italy, there is a huge demand for properties that offer more space per person within a flexible layout that provides a state of the art technical infrastructure. We will begin refurbishment programmes on 60% of the properties to create attractive, modern facilities for new and existing tenants. Another 30% will be placed for sale directly, while the remaining 10% will be sold in a few years’ time following minor works’, said Mr Audagna.  

This sale has repeatedly raised criticism, for example, from former understate-secretary Vittorio Sgarbi, himself a former member of the current government:

[The Economy Ministry] put to auction the first public buildings that were considered alienable and were managed by Patrimonio spa. Protests were immediate. Maybe
it came a bit as a surprise that the criticisms did not refer that much, or solely, to the cultural dimension of the state property sold, but rather to their financial value: too many sell-offs, and all to the benefit of a single huge American company. The idea behind the sale was to raise money for the construction of public infrastructure. But so far only few have been able to take advantage of the sale, and certainly it has not been the State.

One example out of more than thirty known in Italy refers to Villa Manzoni in Rome. It is an impressive building on via Cassia erected on a Roman structure (the so called Villa of Lucio Vero) inside a huge garden near the Nerone tomb.

An architect of debatable taste, a taste close to the one of the Italian poet Gabriele D’Annunzio, pompous and bizarre when referring to historic styles, but still of undeniable attraction, designed Villa Manzoni in the 20s of the last century on behalf of a family which was related to the family of Alessandro Manzoni, the author of the national Italian novel *I promessi sposi* [The Betrothed]. The architect was Armando Brasini (1879–1965) a fairly well-known architect in Italy and abroad (especially in the former USSR and in Spain).

It is questionable whether Villa Manzoni and its garden which is of great naturalistic suggestion and archaeological value should remain publicly accessible, as I think they should.

You cannot discuss, however, the inappropriateness of the price at which the villa was sold: €230,000, equaling the reserve price and the value of a flat of 120 square metres in the popular district of Centocelle in Rome. It is true, the villa was in an abandoned and dilapidated state. Extensive restructuring would have been necessary. But no real-estate agency in Rome would have hesitated to offer three or four times the allotment price. Carlyle, instead, the richest agency of all, bought the villa for a ridiculous sum. How could this happen?

The Carlyle company is not an average company: it is a multinational financial company with strong political ties and particularly strong bonds to George Bush senior, the father of the incumbent US-president. Later numerous other presidential staff members of the Reagan and Bush senior administrations got involved in the company […] To cite another example in Rome, Carlyle also purchased an entire Umberto-style palazzo on via XX Settembre for little more than €200,000 (asking price), obviously taking advantage of the very generous 112/2002 law. Would a more attentive monitoring of auctions not be more appropriate? Not only as far as the auction objects are concerned but also in terms of appropriateness of selling prices?¹³

Even if some parts of this statement may be exaggerated, it shows the general attitude of Italian intellectuals towards the privatisation process. The historical monuments expert Lorenzo Pagnini offered a similar analysis:

*So far just one portfolio has been acquired. The investment company who bought it does certainly not intend to restructure the historic monuments for their intrinsic value, but is acting as a real-estate investor. It has an interest in high-value buildings located in areas of historical flavour. Any real-estate operator would be attracted unless the prices and terms of portfolio selling forced them to buy numerous buildings in one. In terms of real-estate speculations, buying a building located in Piazza del Monte in Reggio Emilia (the central square of the town) or the Renaissance Palazzo Correr in Venice … means a safe investment. A rock-bottom or very low purchase price compared to the real market value is at the heart of every real-estate
speculation. Furthermore, the proceedings of this type of auction foresee, if there are no bids, to continue lowering the price by 25–35% until, if there are still no bids, a final auction takes place on the basis of a deliberate bid. This is the reason why people talk about a sell-off and why real-estate operators take a high interest in buying as much as possible.\textsuperscript{14}

Case Study 2: Manifattura Tabacchi, Florence

Manifattura Tabacchi (a tobacco factory in Florence) is a manufacturing industrial complex built during the Fascist era from 1932 to 1940 by the architects G. Bartoli and P. L. Nervi.

The buildings are in monumental and spacious \textit{novecento} style combined with examples of more rational architecture such as the building of the Puccini cinema and the internal piazza of the factory. The 6-hectare area boasts 15 buildings (some with 6 storeys) of over 500,000 cubic metres. The whole complex is of historic value and constitutes an important contribution to \textit{rationalism} and the \textit{novecentismo}, Italian building style of the 20th century. For this reason the buildings were classified as historic monuments and thus subject to preservation requirements.\textsuperscript{15}

The complex was auctioned in April 2003 and bought by the private investment group Fintecna. As Pagnini states, it seems that it has been sold without previously

\textbf{Figure 6} Manifattura Tabacchi, Florence (20th Century). © Associazione Limen—Beni culturali, Firenze–Roma, http://www.limen.org
as it seems that Fintecna wants to divide the complex into single parts and to re-sell them in an attempt to generate profit.

British American Tobacco Enterprises seem to be interested in the deal. A group of entrepreneurs, headed by Luca Cordero di Montezemolo, have presented an offer as well. Behind the scenes there are other groups from the international tobacco business interested, but, however, cannot buy directly because of the antitrust law. The municipality of Florence can temporarily use the Puccini cinema and theatre for cultural events but it does not own the building. The future use of the area will depend on the decisions of Fintecna and the buyers who will try to make the most of the area and use it for speculation. It is very likely that by changing the function of this area, it will be destined to private construction, shopping centres, etc.

**Case Study 3: The Alba Fucens Archaeological Site**

The Alba Fucens archaeological site was advertised for sale in the 6 August 2003 edition of the *Gazzetta Ufficiale* of the Republic of Italy. An amphitheatre, thermal baths, a forum, a basilica, a sanctuary, mosaics, columns and cobbled roads—an entire Roman city can be bought for €40,615.

“This project offends us all”, says Mario Parlati, mayor of Massa d’Albe, a village close to Alba Fucens. “Alba Fucens must remain public property so that it can continue to be an important tourism and culture destination in this area.”

With other projects involving the selling of ancient archaeological sites, this case has also caused a stir internationally:

An entire archaeological city may go up for sale in Italy, according to … governmental documents. Alba Fucens, one of the most important ancient Roman outposts in central Italy, would be sold off along with hundreds of properties in the attempt to raise money …

Nestling in a little valley at 1,000 meters (3,200 feet) above sea level, Alba Fucens was built to resemble Rome. Only partly excavated, the city hides treasures such as mosaics, frescoes, sculptures and bronzes, as an exhibition, running in the near town of

**Figure 7** Alba Fucens, Massa d’Albe, Southern Italy (4th Century BC). © Associazione Limen—Beni culturali, Firenze–Roma, http://www.limen.org
Avezzano, testifies. The city, which flourished in the 4th century B.C., boasts remains of a well-preserved amphitheatre, a basilica (town hall), a macellum (market), a spa complex and a great sanctuary dedicated to Hercules. All this is now on sale for only 40,615 euros.

'This site needs to be valued and rediscovered, not sold,' says Mario Parlati, mayor of Massa d’Albe.  

So far, the site has not been sold.

A Selection of Other Objects Awaiting Disposal

Alba Fucens is in good company in the list published by the Gazzetta Ufficiale. The 800-page official document lists old barracks and offices, but also jewels such as Palazzo Barberini, a Baroque masterpiece that houses Rome’s National Gallery of Art; the 17th century Villa Regina (Queen’s Villa) in Turin; and Naples’s 16th century Palazzo Bagnara. The island of Nisida near Naples, the Tuscan islands of Gorgona and Pianosa, where until recently Mafia bosses were confined; the Castel Porziano forest by the sea near Rome; and 150 acres of coastline on the Costa Smeralda, in Sardinia, could also be for sale. Prices range from 5,000 euros for a beach on the Tuscan island of Elba to 8 million euros for the natural paradise of Pianosa.

In a statement, the Italian Culture minister specified that the list, for the time being, is only to be used for accounting purposes in order to have a general view of state-owned real estate and its value. But despite the minister’s reassuring words, the scheme has raised a tempest of protest, with marches and petitions throughout the country …

International scholars are also worried. 'We are not talking about minor objects, but about, for example, the Roman Imperial Villa Jovis on Capri. One thing is to sell crumbling barracks, another thing is to sell monuments and archaeological sites,' Elizabeth Fentress, vice president of the International Association for Classical Archaeology, told Discovery News.  

Amongst the objects listed there are Mussolini’s native village of Predappio, as well as the famous Villa Jovis located close to Baiae, that was at the time built on Capri, commissioned by Emperor Tiberius. Now the villa can be bought for less than 90,000 euros. Further ‘for sale’ lists are planned to be published before the end of the year.

Currently, other objects of cultural value waiting to be sold include:

- **Cosilinum**, city of Magna Graecia, in the southern province of Salerno, has 999 assets for sale at €1,000 each: an entire archaeological site at the heart of the Lucania region with the *Quadrata* tower and a surrounding area of 43,000 m². The city dates back to the 4th century BC. Currently, there is a lack both of an adequate excavation team and of bibliographical sources for research.

- **Palazzo Artelli**, Trieste (1904). The architecture of the palazzo is inspired by the *Seicento veneziano* (17th-century Venetian style) and takes its name from Filippo Artelli, who commissioned the construction of the palazzo in 1904, entrusting the architects Giorgio Polli with the external construction and Antonio Bruni with the interiors. Price: €890,889.
Albergo San Giuliano Terme, thermal residential area of the Grand Dukes of Tuscany, designed in 1700. The buildings of the complex went through a structural transformation in 1935, which devastated Ruggero and Pellegrini’s fine architecture. Only the external façades were retained and saved from decay. The right-hand side of the illustration shows the thermal pavilions located at the centre of the site where the Fascist building, which is now for sale, was erected. It has incorporated some of the thermal pavilion’s remains, containing covered frescoes, entablatures and a theatre. Price: €464,812.
• *Forte San Giacomo* in Porto Azzurro, a prison, is a 17th-century Spanish fortress. In 1603 the troops of the King of Spain landed in Longone, and in a relatively short time they managed to build a massive fortress. Price: €5.5 million.

• *La Certosa di San Martino*, Naples, surrounded by delightful scenery, is located at the foot of Vomero hill, below San Elmo castle. It dates back to the 14th century and was fully restructured towards the middle of the 15th century by the architects G. A. Dosia and C. Fazago. Price: more than €56 million.

• *Castello dei Carraresi*, Padua. The original 13th-century building with the *Specola* tower was created alongside the medieval walls with an entrance from Piazza Castello. A transformation operation by Danieletti took place in 1807, when the structure was changed into a prison.
Golfo Aranci, a fishing village on the island of Sardegna, is located at the foot of Capo Figari, at 340 m above sea level. Pozzo Sacro di Milis, located in the ancient settlement close to the railway station, proves its ancient origins. Price: €135,234.

Isola di Pianosa, a penal colony—now abandoned—that has favoured its isolation and has preserved it from tourism and development, is rich in prehistoric archaeological sites. After the discovery of natural and artificial underground facilities—partly dating back to the Eneolithic period—by R. Foresi and G. Chierici at the end of the 19th century, other discoveries followed in the last decade of the 20th century. Price: €8 million.

These are some of the objects included in the first part of the inventory that lists the patrimony available for sale, published in the Gazzetta Ufficiale of the Republic of Italy on 6 August 2002. However, not all objects listed will eventually end up on the market. For the time being this is only a general inventory. And neither the estimated values are realistic, but calculated on the basis of updated old cadastral values. The Ministry of Cultural Heritage...
will be in charge of establishing which objects are eligible for valorisation or selling procedures. Then it will be the turn of the companies … Waiting for the ministry’s selections, the publication of further catalogues is expected.23

In August 2003 the region of Tuscany asked for notification of a series of buildings subject to preservation requirements. Amongst them are: the Marucelliana library in Florence, the superintendency of the historic monuments in Arezzo, the clock tower with the little church and the settlements on Gorgonia island. Other regions may follow, and a change of regional governments after elections may mean that, in the long term, without a well-structured and comprehensive policy, an increasing number of objects will be sold.

A Heated Debate

Currently in Italy, one fundamental issue is discussed in the public debate—whether Italy’s cultural heritage can be privatised at all, since it constitutes a major aspect of regional, national and European identity, and, in fact, of the world.

As early as 2001, rumours that Italy’s cultural possessions, archives, libraries, museums, archaeological sites and monuments might be privatised triggered ‘an unprecedented alarm in the history of international museology’.24 Following an appeal by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), 37 directors of the most renowned museums in the world, such as Neil McGregor (National Gallery, London); Robert Anderson (British Museum); Nicholas Serota (Tate Gallery, London); Fernando Checa-Cremades (Prado, Madrid); Eline de Wilde (National Museums of Belgium); John Leithon (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam); Irina Antonova (Pushkin Museum, Moscow); Peter Kalus Schuster (Museums of Berlin); Rymond Keaveney (National Gallery, Dublin); Henry Lorette (the Louvre), and the directors of: the Metropolitan Museum, New York; the National Gallery, Washington, DC; the State Museums of Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Montreal, and also the directors of private museums that are dependent on foundations, such as the Paul...
Getty Museum, Malibu and the Guggenheim Museum, New York, signed a petition against the privatisation of Italian excavations, museums and monuments, because they feared the ‘denaturing’ of Italian museums, which would no longer fulfil UNESCO’s primary criteria for a museum, i.e. to be a non-profit organisation and to serve for public benefit. Further, they petitioned for a far-reaching national and international debate on Italian privatisation plans, because Italian heritage constitutes, as they stated, a primordial value for World Heritage and thus belongs not to individuals but to the whole world.

The national and international debate on this issue intensified with the new privatisation Law 112/2002 and has been ongoing since then. ‘Public outcry grew when, in 2002 the minister of cultural goods spoke of plans to auction some property.’

Supporters and opponents in this debate are presently balancing each other—both with good reasons. For the case is—as most cases of this kind—ambivalent.

Supporters say: the plenitude of Italian heritage (according to current estimates there are over 3,000 museums, more than 2,000 archaeological sites, 20,000 historical centres, 45,000 historical parks and gardens, 30,000 palaces and villas, churches and monasteries, and innumerable castles) is Italy’s wealth but also its burden. There are too many historic monuments to be preserved, and the state lacks the financial means to preserve and restore them. If Italian governments continue their past policies, these monuments will fall into disrepair. Therefore, it is of prime importance to pay off public debt through partial privatisation, with annual savings of between €80 and €130 million.

The extraordinary wealth and variety of our artistic heritage is both an asset and a burden for the Italian Government. On the other hand several corporations and financial institutions—which are no longer interested in sponsoring culture—are pushing hard to be entrusted with direct management of some national monuments and museums through forms of concessions. Thanks to their effective management, they claim, the Italian artistic heritage could become a profitable business. This is, in fact, a quite controversial issue, as the operation of cultural institutions by profit-making companies could lead, some fear, to a sort of commercialisation of culture not taking into account its relevant social aspects.

However, the opponents also have good arguments. They point out that compared with other European countries which have far fewer assets to preserve, Italy still spends little even after its reforms and privatisations. On average, EU countries spend between 0.5% and 1% of their GDP on the preservation of historic monuments and cultural heritage, but the figure for Italy so far has been just 0.17–0.20%. Efforts made to improve the preservation of the many decaying monuments are, they say, laudable in principle. However, opponents believe that privatisation is the wrong way to go about it. Instead of privatisation, they favour a new sponsoring initiative as well as new state-run management, which may also return profits.

But over and above all this, opponents first and foremost ask the key question: can cultural historic public assets be privatised? They fear an impending ‘Disneyfication’ of European culture and the expropriation of the general public’s history and cultural heritage.
This stock of [heritage] is a major part of Italy’s identity, and hence cannot be alienated for material gain without vast non-material costs. Furthermore, Italy’s museums and monuments are integral parts of the culture of their individual communities. The free-marketeers are threatening the cultural life of every Italian region. The dangers are genuine, and serious ... The current minister of Beni Culturali, Giuliano Urbani, prefers in his book *Il tesoro degli italiani* (2002) the concept of merchandising. But the only justifiable role for the private sector in these core activities of culture is not buying and owning, but the sponsoring of activities under the cultural sector’s control. There is no reason in the world why the State should provide private companies with direct profits from such activities: the treasures belong to the people.²⁷

While Italy’s political left initially also supported draft bills and initiatives to privatise certain government property,²⁸ it is now more or less unanimously against privatisation. The centre and the right are both internally split on this issue. The case has brought about a rare politicisation of both proponents and opponents in the past years and months. Citizens’ groups have formed country-wide, and societies for the protection of historic monuments such as ‘Italia Nostra’, trade unions and associations have been mobilising their supporters. In May 2003, state president Carlo Azeglio Ciampi appealed for ‘moderation’ in the sale of cultural monuments. A great number of petitions from intellectuals followed (among others, a collective petition by the WWF, Italia Nostra and FAI).

Italy’s Minister for Cultural Heritage responded to fears voiced by citizens’ groups and environmentalist societies such as Legambiente that, in principle, owing to the vague wording of the law, Italy’s entire cultural and natural heritage was at stake and that, theoretically, even the Colosseum, the Uffizi Gallery or the most significant works of art could be sold.

‘Nobody wants to sell the Colosseum or Michelangelo’s David. I hope to inspire an authentic revolution in arts management, but nobody is privatising the Colosseum, Pompeii, or the Uffizi Gallery.’²⁹ And: ‘There is no danger, because the Italian state cannot sell its precious jewels. This is impeded by the Constitution of our country. Our objectives are the safeguarding, preservation and valorisation of our artistic patrimony.’³⁰ And, as General Manager Paolo Serio says,

> We must respond to the standardization of culture and its oppression by the productive system with an offer of diversification and the broadening of management independence by the local agencies. The new Financial Act provides for new models of cooperation between public and private parties where foundations play a fundamental role.³¹

In addition, there are also initiatives by Urbani to set up a private initiative fund, possibly a state lottery exclusively for the preservation of monuments, as well as his idea to found a Cultural Heritage Observatory in Italy for Europe, which should optimise European funds for the cultural sector. ‘The ministry is putting on the pressure for more state funds, clearing the way for more private investment through tax breaks and even trying to launch a lottery that would finance only cultural projects.’³²
Proposals for Alternative Solutions

The Italian government has promised repeatedly never to sell assets which are of national interest. Yet the question is: who decides what is of ‘national interest’? And how will this be defined in as difficult an area as culture (in which national and nationalistic interests are usually not the same)? These questions are currently concerning many national and international experts.

After nation-wide demonstrations by art employees and environmentalists in December over the vague wording and muddy procedures of the new law, Culture Minister Giuliano Urbani appointed the impressively titled *Scientific Committee for the Protection of the Cultural Heritage*, to suggest criteria for deciding property which is sellable. But deciding what is expendable becomes very dicey when the cultural heritage is so rich—and so much part of the national identity. The 17th-century Villa Feroni a Bellavista, for example, a Baroque masterpiece just 30 minutes from Florence, is now abandoned. If a buyer came along with a commitment to restore the villa and make it into a convention centre, accountants at the Economy Ministry would readily agree. Salvatore Settis, former director of the Getty Research Institute of Art History in Los Angeles, says: ‘There are hundreds of privately owned historic villas abandoned, but the government does not force the owners to sell.’ Settis suggests compiling a complete inventory of cultural property owned by the state, no easy task in a country as rich in heritage as Italy. Then the list should be divided into three categories:

- items of no cultural interest, which could be sold;
- items of clear cultural interest, which could not be sold;
- items that fall into a grey area, for which criteria must be devised to determine what can be put on the market.

‘We have to get away from the pressure of finding something that can be sold,’ Settis says. The real urgency is to correct a very dangerous law.  

In this respect, in his comprehensive analysis dated July 2003, Settis himself writes:

The [debate] is now being conducted around one single issue with depressing monotony, the diatribe between State and Regions with accusations of centralism and not less equally loud paens to privatisation in which voices of the Right and trills from the Left mix together until they become indistinguishable. Nobody denies the importance of this issue, however, without forgetting that if the public property is further privatised the State and the Regions will have less of it to administer. Giorgio Oppo, distinguished jurist and scholar of the Italian Academy of Science, defines the new law as an example of lack of imagination, and ... shows that the law is ... of dubious constitutionality.

But is it really wrong to sell part of the property of the state? Certainly not; but the privatisations (which have always taken place) should obey some basic rules. Firstly, is the insuperable distinction between property that is historic, artistic, archaeological and typical of the landscape and thus inalienable in its nature, and the rest, that may obviously be alienated; second is the absolute transparency of the mechanisms of alienation; thirdly, the equity of prices with regard to the market [...]
It is of prime importance that a census of all state assets be carried out immediately (the Economy Minister should understand that it is all about investment on the public property), and that it is done by who can do it, that is, not solely by the State, but by the local Superintendencies with fresh forces and adequate resources; that it is efficient and transparent and if necessary targeted in the first stage to the identification of the assets that may be immediately alienated without detriment to the historical and cultural values. No less important is that meanwhile the regime of inalienability of historic artistic state property is reaffirmed as it is guaranteed by the Italian civil code.

The new law regarding cultural assets emerges in a heavily contaminated environment under the sword of Damocles …

Conclusions

The case of privatisation of Italy’s cultural heritage is currently open. Further lists are being compiled and more auctions are imminent. The privatisation of public property resulting from Law 112/2002 is too recent to allow for the adequate judgement of effects and outcomes. Those buildings that have already been sold have not yet been the subject of specific intervention, and their future seems uncertain, especially in relation to the considerable mobilisation of public opinion and of cultural heritage workers and experts.

While several prospective buyers have already signalled their intention to sell at a profit after the five-year period has elapsed in which no further sale is allowed (as stipulated by the current privatisation law), many observers have speculated that a future centre-left government will repurchase the objects. At the same time, citizens’ groups have sometimes been successful in hindering the privatisation of single objects or in having them purchased by public institutions with the help of donations. One example is the Legambiente environmental group that, according to statements dating from September 2003, wants to buy Isola di Pianosa (Pianosa Island) by paying for it out of its own pocket. All in all, the situation remains highly volatile.

The Italian model of privatisation of cultural heritage could spread to other European countries that have similar problems. It would certainly be supported and accelerated by the planned GATS Treaty and by the privatisation of ‘cultural services’ set out in this agreement. So far, the privatisation of Italy’s cultural heritage could be considered as a basic issue and an exemplar for the future Europe-wide problem of finding a balance between cultural heritage and ‘post-modern’ capitalism. In this regard, various British and US laws that address some of the same issues—such as the Historic Sites Act of 1935, the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, the creation of the National Trust for Historic Preservations in 1966 and others—could probably serve not as a model but as an additional basis for further discussion. To many Italians, the privatisation of Italy’s cultural heritage is currently one of the issues that demonstrate, in a practical way, the pros and cons of economic globalisation, and it is politicising the country in a profound way. Predictions as to the final outcome are very difficult to make at the present time. However, it can be anticipated that this issue will continue to split the country and to lead to heated debate in the years to come.
Notes


[6] Ibid.


[14] Pagnini, ‘Situation and Future Perspectives of Privatization of Italian Cultural Heritage’.


[16] Pagnini, ‘Situation and Future Perspectives of Privatization of Italian Cultural Heritage’.


[18] Ibid.


[20] Ibid.


[22] This information comes from Pagnini, ‘Privatizing Italian Culture’.

[23] Pagnini, ‘Situation and Future Perspectives of Privatization of Italian Cultural Heritage’.


[31] Paolo Serio, 10 December 2002, at the Rome Expo.
References


[33] James and Murphy, 'Where Have All the Patrons Gone?', 2.
[34] Settis, *Italia S.P.A.*